A METHOD TO STUDY RELIGION

DALJEET SINGH

A METHOD TO STUDY RELIGION

DALJEET SINGH

Comparative studies of religion are essential both for the proper appreciation of any religion and its features, and more especially, for identifying the reasons for the wide varieties of religious doctrines and developments in the world. No doubt, the environmental situation and the social milieu in which a religion arises, do have their impact on its growth and the problems it seeks to tackle. Yet, it is very true that the perceptions, the internal strength, and the ideology of a religion are fundamentally the elements that give it substance and direction, and shape its personality.

Unless some definite principles are followed in making a comparative study of different religious systems, confusions, misunderstandings and misinterpretations are bound to occur, in the presentation thereof. The important thing, hence, is to identify the basic elements of religion and compare the fundamentals and the essentials of different systems. Otherwise, mere stress on similarities or dissimilarities only in the ancillary or peripheral features of the two or more systems could be very misleading, and give an entirely lopsided view of the traditions concerned.

The following could be the basic elements on which it is necessary to ascertain and compare the features of a system before arriving at any conclusion regarding its affinities, nature, class and stand.

1. THE METAPHYSICAL VIEW

While it is true that a religious system is not a philosophy, yet its metaphysical assumptions and its view about the nature of Reality, so often determine its other basic characteristics and its approach to the

world. For example, in Yoga, Sankhya and Jainism, two kinds of Reality, material and spiritual, are assumed, and man is a combination of both. No one basic Reality, much less a creative Reality of God, is assumed. The logic of such dualism, therefore, involves the isolation of the spiritual monad from its connection or combination with the material element. Thus, in each case, the ideal is of withdrawal from the world and its activities, without any role for the ideal man. In the same manner, in the monistic system of Sankra, the world and its activities are mithya or unreal. Therefore, monasticism or the virtual turning of one's back to the world become necessary. Similarly, in a pantheistic system, moral life ceases to have a spiritual or primary value. Accordingly, the metaphysical assumptions of a religious system have a significant relevance for understanding a system and its character.

2. NATURE OF REALITY

The nature of Reality assumed by the tradition has also a crucial meaning. In case the Reality is attributive, world activity and moral life assume a primary and spiritual significance. Similar is the importance of the issue whether Reality is both Transcendent and Immanent. But, far more important is the assumption whether Reality is creative or not. For, in a materialistic or deterministic system, creativity and freedom have not much of a place, or scope.

3. REALITY OF THE WORLD

Answer to this issue makes all the difference between a system like Sankra's Vedanta where the world is mithya, or unreal, and a system like Sikhism or Islam, where the creation is not only real, but creative activity in the world is essential for the spiritual growth of man. The systems of the former kind recommend monasticism, involving withdrawal from life, whereas in the latter kind world affirmation becomes an essential feature.

4. IS WORLD WORTHWHILE ?

So far as approach to the world is concerned, this is a very important issue, dividing all systems into two categories, one of life-affirmation and the other of life-negation. For example, in Buddhism, world is a place of suffering. Salvation lies only in Nirvana through asceticism and withdrawal from life. Moral life could give one a better birth than before, but it could never lead to Nirvana. Similarly, in systems like Yoga, Nathism and some categories of Saivism, world is a place of misery. In Jainism, too, world activity, howsoever good or moral, is an involvement, and has to be given up. As against that, in Sikhism, Christianity and Islam, creative activity in the world, or activity in carrying out the Will of God, is of the highest spiritual significance. As such, the world is a meaningful place for spiritual endeavours. It is far from being a place of suffering or misery, which has to be given up, or from which release has to be sought. In fact, in systems like Sikhism, the entire growth of man and his spiritual stature are judged by the deeds performed by him in this world. Actually, divergent answers on this issue would place two systems entirely into widely varying categories of religions.

5. GOAL OF LIFE

For obvious reasons, the goal fixed in a religious system is of fundamental significance. For, this determines in many ways its entire direction and world-view, its values, and its methodology and discipline. Here, too, whatever be the apparent similarities between the two traditions, these would be meaningless, if the systems have opposing spiritual goals. In Sikhism, the goal is to carry out, through deeds, the attributive and creative Will of God. It can have nothing in common with a system, like Yoga or Sankhya, where no God is assumed, and where the goal is the isolation of the spiritual element from the material element. Actually, the spiritual goal in a religion determines not only its entire approach towards life, but also its ethics

and the role of the superman. For example, religious systems in which the goal is isolation of the spiritual element, or merger in Reality, or even union, as an end in itself, have nothing in common with systems like Sikhism where human duty is ever to carry out the Will of God. In each case, the endeavour or activity is directed towards opposite ends. And this alone makes for a fundamental difference. It is the Yogic or Jainic goal of isolation of the spiritual monad, that make asceticism and monasticism distinct features and institutions of the Indian culture and history. And, it is these institutions that arose only in India, and are typically Indian contribution to foreign cultures like the Egyptian, Christian, etc. For, such asceticism was unknown to Babylonians or early Egyptians or Iranians. Hence, the importance of a goal in the study of different religions. The influence of the goal of isolation and of asceticism and monasticism as a sequel, has indeed, been profuse and fundamental. In contrast with it was the Vedic ideal of activity, heaven and sacrifices under which everything in this world, and even in the next, could be sought and obtained by the meticulous performance of rituals. Probably, as a compromise, the system of four Ashrams was devised early in the Upanisadic times. But, this compromise remained mostly a paper ideal, and the basic dichotomy of goals and approach continued not only to cause confusion, but also to affect adversely the religious growth, with attendant effects, sometimes quite adverse, on the moral, social and cultural developments. Hence the fundamental importance of the goal set in a religious system.

6. MYSTIC COMMUNION AND FACTOR OF FREEDOM

The issue of mystic communion has very great relevance for believers in and students of religion. Scholars, especially students of anthropology, sociology and history, believing only in deterministic and environmental philosophies and factors, are liable to make serious errors of understanding and interpretation, if they ignore this factor of freedom or mystic communion in relation to a religious tradition,

movement, or development. Let us try to define this factor of freedom or mystic communion. Most of the traditional religions believe that there is a higher level of Reality, different from the empirical or phenomenal reality of which we are a part, and which works under a logic of cause and effect. All the same, under this logic, governing our entire rational thinking, we are unable to explain the First Cause or the Original Causeless Cause, the Creator, or the Transcendent Reality, which is ineffable and cannot be described in terms of "Is or Is not." We do not know the logic governing this Reality or Consciousness, and, therefore, call it Free or Creative, in so far as it introduces in human affairs a new element unexplained by the rational or scientific logic of man. Mystics or prophets like Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and the Sikh Gurus have not only asserted the existence of such a Reality, but have also claimed some kind of touch, link or communion with that Reality or consciousness. Christ clearly asserts his communion with God. Buddha too claims elevation to the state of Nirvana. The Sikh Gurus also repeatedly affirm that it is the Divine message that they have been delivering.

But, materialistic, deterministic or behavioural philosophies do not accept such statements or claims. This is understandable. But, it would be grossly naive to interpret the martyrdoms of Chirst and the Sikh Gurus on the deterministic basis and ignore altogether the element of freedom and creativity in human affairs. In fact, it is from the sacrifices of these men, that we understand and accept the value and validity of a free, moral or creative life. Otherwise, all talk of honesty, integrity and truth would be sheer hypocrisy and moonshine; since the realistic spectacle today is that the best of our teachers, scientists and academicians barter away their services, without any tangible compunction or protest, to their respective national states feverishly engaged in constructing engines of death and destruction for the rest of mankind. Against this background, it would be almost a perversion either to dub the statements and deeds of these great martyrs as

actuated by hallucination, or determined by environmental causality. Therefore, in assessing or comparing a religious thesis, it is important to know whether the founder of the faith claims communion with the Creative Consciousness. While the role of men like Luther or other religious leaders could be understood or explained by the means of environmental, deterministic factors, such an explanation would be simply incongruous when applied to creative individuals like Christ, Buddha or the Sikh Gurus, who themselves claim touch with Higher Reality. Therefore, religious developments initiated by the creative individuals have to be viewed and appreciated very differently from the subsequent developments when that personality is off the stage of history. Hence, the importance of this issue and the claims of the prophet concerned.

7. THE PATH AND PRACTICES FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE GOAL

The discipline and methods suggested for attaining the spiritual goal in any system have an obvious relevance in any comparative study. Of course, the methods and practices prescribed are determined by the doctrines and ideals of the system, but these certainly clarify them, as also its basic tenets, structure and approach to social life. Religious leaders have prescribed a large number of practices and disciplines aimed at achieving the spiritual goal. For example, methods of Yoga, asceticism, one-point concentration, etc., varying in their rigour and duration, have been suggested. In Buddhism and Catholic Christianity, monasticism is a recognized mode of spiritual attainments. Side by side, celibacy and withdrawal from life are also prescribed. Ritualism and the potency and the mystic power of the recitation, or repetition of words and mantras, too, has been deemed spiritually efficacious. Deep religious devotion, including song and dance, and the invoking of ecstasy, are also religious practices. In a system like that of Naths and some other Saiva systems, extreme formalism in dress and odd living, celibacy, ahimsa and non-engagement in any work, are

prescribed; and, alternatively, even sensual indulgence has been recognised. As against all these methods, the emphasis in some religions on moral deeds and carrying out the Will of God is deemed to be of primary significance and value in the spiritual progress. In Sikhism, the greatest stress is on moral deeds, on which alone human assessment is based. Evidently, different methodologies and spiritual practices are linked to different systems. For, celibacy, asceticism, ritualism and monasticism have no place in a system, where the stress is on moral deeds, leading to the spiritual development of man. So much so, that a system like Sikhism, prescribing the medium of moral deeds as the major vehicle of spiritual progress, clearly rejects or frowns upon methods of asceticism, ritualism or formalism. Such systems in their methodology and practices stand at opposite extremes without any meeting ground between them. That is so in the case of Sikhism and Nathism. Therefore, the principal modes of the discipline prescribed throw considerable light on the character, class, ideals, and affinities of a religious system.

8. ROLE OF THE SUPERMAN

Another major issue is the role of the superman. The goal, the philosophy, its discipline and its attitude to the world, are important distinguishing features in identifying and classifying different religious systems. Though largely depending on the other basic characteristics of a system, the role of the superman is a very significant point in differentiating between traditions, and understanding whether these are allied or not. For example, in the case of systems like Yoga, Sankhya, or Jainism, the superman, once isolated, is away forever from the world of man. He has, with extreme asceticism and discipline, sought and achieved his liberation from the world. He is, therefore, not going to re-involve himself in its entanglements. The Jain Tirthankra would not answer or respond to any prayers of men below. Similarly, in the Vedantic system, where 'I am Brahman' (aham Brahm asmi) is the final stage achievement, and involvement in the relative world of

man is a fall. Once liberated, the question of return to a lower stage of development does not arise. Hence, in this system, the liberated person ceases to have any meaningful link with the world. In systems where the idea is merger in the Absolute, or bliss and tranquility of union with the Absolute as an end in itself, the superman has virtually no role to play. But, the position is very different in systems where the superman considers it his primary duty to carry out an attributive or creative role in life. For example, Guru Nanak's first words after his enlightenment were, "There is no Hindu, nor Mussalman." Further he says "A real superman is one who treats every person as his own and equal." In his system, the important thing is man. The superman is spontaneously benevolent, and "God showers His grace where the weak are helped." "He is the Shelter for the shelterless." So is the role of the superman. In such systems, the redemption of man is the primary concern. The sixth Guru stated that his sword is to deal with the tyrants. Obviously, where the ideology and methodology are very different, the role of the superman after his achievement is equally divergent in activity and direction.

9. SUPERMAN AND SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Different answers to this issue also sharply distinguish one religious system from the other. While socio-political activity on the part of the superman is the logical culmination in a system where the primary interest is in man and his future, in many religions such activity is virtually a taboo for the superman. Islam and Sikhism are the two systems where the responsibility of socio-political life is accepted as a religious duty. Probably, the case of Joan of Arc is the solitary example in the Christian world where a person of God has felt compelled to enter the political field. Except, regarding caste duties, all the Indian traditions (other than Sikhism), and to an extent even Christianity, are against it. It is for this reason that a person like Toynbee criticizes Prophet Mohammad for taking up socio-political activity. Similarly, Tagore, Gandhi, and J.N. Sarkar adversely comment on the role of

Guru Gobind Singh. It is on account of the same background that McLeod has failed to understand the role of the sixth to tenth Gurus, and has to raise the prop or phantom of Jat infiltration in order to explain the militarization of the Sikh movement. The case of Buddhism and Sikhism will clarify the issue and the sharp differences in that regard. In Buddhism, world is a place of suffering wherein salvation could be only in Nirvana. Good deeds in this world could never lead to Nirvana, though these could give a better birth. So much so, that, once in Nirvana, further activity is stopped. It is only at the penultimate stage or arhat, that activity could be possible. Buddha was clearly requested to return to his kingdom, but he declined to do so. While there is no doubt that Buddhism has a strong ethical content, its doctrine of ahimsa and world being a suffering, almost place a bar against socio-political activity by the superman. As against it, in Sikhism, since man is the primary object of interest, as explained by the Sixth Guru to saint Ramdas, socio-political activity becomes a logical and moral duty of every religious person. It is on account of these fundamental differences of ideology that some historians have accused Buddhistic ahimsa to be the cause of India's political subjugation, and, on the other hand, others have criticized Sikh Gurus for wrongly diverting the pure stream of religion into the muddy fields of politics. But, it is these basic ideological differences that have led the two traditions to play distinctly divergent roles in history.

10. ETHICS

Just like the methodology and discipline, the ethics of a system is the projection and product of its basic doctrines and ideals. For, the value system of a religion has primarily been devised to serve, aid and help in achieving its goals. Accordingly, as there are variations in spiritual goals, there are differences in the ethical systems. Further, religions, which do not accept any social responsibility, or are other worldly, have ethics which is quite divergent from the one in which the love of man and love of God are almost synonymous. Both in Yoga and

Nathism, no social responsibility is accepted. Each individual has to secure his own release from the bondage and misery of the world. In the individual's spiritual venture, he alone has to help himself. Not that truth and purity of conduct have no meaning, but these have no social relevance. Therefore, the ethical systems of religions like Christianity and Yoga-Sankhya are, in many ways, quite different. In Sikhism, God is the Ocean of attributes. Its ethics is basically social, because attributes have a meaning mainly in the social field. Where God is the succour of the helpless, the seeker has necessarily to accept social responsibility and consequently an ethics that is socially oriented. For example, the Sikh Gurus lay down the theological doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and also the logical ethical corollaries of the brotherhood of man and treating everyone as equal. Evidently, these corollaries are pregnantly and emphatically social in their content. All these three concepts form a unified and integrated doctrine. No part of it can be divorced from the other. Let us also take the example of Buddhism. According to Hinayana Buddhism, the fate of everyone is the result of his earlier deeds, One's blindness is due to one's own faults. It is a single line of ethical or moral responsibility. But, in the Mahayana, the ethical system is very different. It involves both aggregate and individual responsibility. This acceptance of social responsibility and consequent shift to a socially oriented ethics is evidently the result of the Boddhisatva doctrine. So much so, that the Mahayana Buddhists, with their socially oriented ethics, their Boddhisatva doctrine, and their concept of aggregate responsibility, call the ethics of Hinayana individualistic and selfish. And yet, with the goals set in the Hinayana system, its ethics is perfectly logical and consonant with its doctrines and system. Hence, the ethics of a religion, being intimately linked to its fundamentals, is very relevant and helpful in understanding its doctrines and goals.

11. THE UNITY OF PERCEPTION, IDEOLOGY AND ACTIVITIES

In rightly understanding a religious system, and in appreciating and placing its different doctrines in their proper perspective, it is essential to bear the unity of perception, ideology and activities in mind. Let us first explain what we mean by the unity of perception, ideology, and activity. Almost every religion owes its origin to the mystic or higher religious experience of some personality or prophet. Actually, it is this experience which forms the real fount of the entire ideology, mission and activities of the mystics. In this sequence, the first stage is the perception or the religious experience. At the second stage, the saint, naturally, tries to understand it, and reacts to it. This is the stage where thought appears or intervenes. This reaction constitutes both the ideology and the proposed plan of the saint for giving practical shape to the ideology. This ideology and plan are generally understood and interpreted by others from the words expressed, or other means of communication resorted to by the saint. The third stage is the life actually lived by the saint. This forms his real response to his higher religious experience, and reflects his ideology and the decisions made thereunder. For example, if the religious experience of a mystic is that God is all love, is Shelter for the shelterless and Help of the helpless, the mystic's ideology is that God is the Ocean of virtues and a God of attributes. In line with it, and as a reaction to this experience, he compulsively frames a plan of action of love and help to the poor and the needy. Accordingly, the activities undertaken and programmes initiated and executed by the saint are the true reflection and projection of his higher religious experience and the consequent ideology. The Fourth Sikh Guru explains the point in a beautiful and apt simile "While experiencing 'You', the 'I' is gone. The difference of 'You' and 'I' is obliterated. It is now only 'You' flowing." The activities of the saint are only the form and shape which his basic experience directs and takes. Such mystics rarely express in words the nature of their religious experience, it being generally ineffable. And, even if they do, the description is too inadequate to form the basis of a rational system. For the same reasons, even the utterances and

statements of these persons are not always clear, or those are too brief and merely symbolic. In fact, these are not meant to be such; nor are these always aimed at laying a comprehensive religious philosophy. It is in the interpretation of these statements that students of religion and others make major errors of understanding and deduction. But it is the deeds and activities of the person that portray truly and directly his higher religious experience and ideology. All we seek to stress is, first, the inalienable unity of experience, ideology and activity; and, second, the activities of the saint alone being the right key to the understanding and appreciation of his perceptions and message. So often, mere statements, taken in their isolation, have been wrongly interpreted, especially by those distant in time and space. Because, howsoever, sophisticated these may be, rational tools cannot rise above the prejudices and predilections of the person employing them.

Scholars, trained in a behaviouristic or mechanical methodology, have generally a tendency to trace one religious' development from a preceding one. But, trying to build such a chain of ratiocination is a virtual denial of the validity, the very novelty, and the free character of the religious experience. Hence, the need for adhering to the principle of the unity of experience, ideology and activity, and of understanding and interpreting a religious message purely from the activities of its author. Otherwise, so often students of religion fall into the error of picking up seemingly common utterances of two religious pioneers and then of trying to relate them to a common source or a connecting bond. Mere words and statements unrelated to the deeds of their author are quite likely to be misunderstood and misinterpreted. Deeds alone are the true index of the ideology of the author.

12. THE WORLDVIEW

The worldview of a system is the best expression of its philosophy and appreciation of human destiny, of its aims and objectives, and of the direction in which men must move. The worldview represents the

character and class of a system. Schweitzer, in his survey of different philosophical and religious systems, classifies them broadly in two distinct categories, the one with the worldview of life-affirmation and the other that is largely life-denying. In one case, creative and ethical participation in life is the spiritual goal. In the other case, withdrawal from the world for merger or union with Reality is the natural aim. The broad features of the two types of systems are quite characteristic and contrastive. In one case, moral life forms the chief fundamental of spiritual progress. For example, Guru Nanak says that the superman is he who treats all as his equals. In the other case, withdrawal from life, asceticism or monasticism forms an integral part of the religious discipline. Therefore, in appreciating the meaning and import of the doctrines and practices of a system, the context of its worldview has to be kept in view. For, each part not only reflects the other, but in turn also determines it.

Hence, for the intrinsic understanding of the features and class of any religious system, it is absolutely essential that the aforesaid principles, measures and methodology are constantly kept in view. Any varied approach is bound to lead to wrong conclusions. However, for obvious reasons, many of these principles may appear to overlap each other. This is so because, it is the components of an integrated whole that have to be taken up individually, and features of each part noted in isolation, so as to identify the same and the whole, in the light of the principles stated above.